

Posted to the web on: 20 January 2009

No easy solution to plight of migrants

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ON THE first Tuesday of every month, a small group convenes in Braamfontein to decide how to assist some of Johannesburg's newest foreign arrivals.

The constant stream of migrants makes this an almost impossible task for the committee. But try it must. "We don't want to see anybody on the street," says Maggie Moanakoena, describing the plan by the city's migrant help desk to consolidate the network of homeless shelters.

The brainchild of the City of Johannesburg, the help desk opened in late 2006, before the xenophobic attacks last May which claimed the lives of 62 people and displaced hundreds more. Ironically, the desk has assumed a much lower profile since then. Little has been heard of the "transitional shelter" planned for Fordsburg to take in stranded migrants and some of the city's other homeless people.

"There are no political points to be won, especially with an election around the corner, from helping migrants," suggests Loren Landau, director of the Forced Migration Studies Programme (FMSP) at the University of the Witwatersrand.

Migration remains a hot issue in SA, which is struggling to balance the humanitarian needs of refugees and the skills requirements of its economy with the attitudes of locals.

Landau and other migration researchers hope the issue will be kept out of the election campaign. But this may not be possible.

Last month the Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in SA (Cormsa) called on the Human Rights Commission to lead a probe into rumours of planned violence against foreigners in the run-up to the elections. It argues that the government "has done little to address the structural and political causes" of last year's attacks on foreigners.

Among the tasks the migrant help desk is engaged with is counter-xenophobia training for its staff. But the desk was really designed as a referral centre for various service providers in the city. "There isn't much that they can offer and thus (they) rely more on NGOs already working in the sector to provide the needed assistance," says Mpilo Shange-Buthane, who sits of the steering committee on behalf of Cormsa.

She ascribes the desk's diminished profile to the Gauteng government's taking over of assistance for those displaced in last year's attacks. "There was also fear that if they publicised themselves at that critical point, they might have put the lives of the migrants who visit their desk at risk," she says. Even the name of the centre does not appear on the CJ Cronje Building in Loveday Street, where it is based.

Bishop Paul Verryn of the Central Methodist Church says none of the scores of refugees sheltering in the church have interacted with the help desk, although this does not necessarily mean it does not work.

"I would instinctively trust them, but we don't use them," he says.

When he opened the help desk, mayor Amos Masondo committed the city to foreign nationals' welfare. "We must recognise diversity as an urban strength. Like urbanisation, migration can and should be managed. It cannot be completely controlled, let alone halted," Masondo had said.

However, Landau says if Johannesburg is to take a strong pro-migrant stance in the wake of the xenophobic violence, consistent leadership is required. "What is most worrying are rumours, some confirmed, that local politicians are trying to mobilise votes on an anti-immigrant platform."

Since last year's outbreak there have been sporadic reports of more attacks against foreigners, especially Somalis. In the past week there were reports in Johannesburg's Cresta as well as in Free State's Harrismith area.

Early this month, Cormsa called for action against vigilantism, after a Zimbabwean and a Malawian died when they were forced to jump from a Durban block of flats. In pursuit was a mob that included members of the community policing forum. The FMSP also implicates policing forums in last year's targeting of foreigners in some places.

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